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Testimony of the Honorable Richard A. Gephardt

House Committee on Banking and Financial Services  
Full Committee Hearing on the Global AIDS Crisis and H.R. 3519

I want to commend you, Chairman Leach, along with Ranking Member LaFalce and all of the Members of your Committee for holding this important hearing today, and for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony regarding what I believe is a preeminent moral issue of our time -- making sure the world community summons the will to take strong action to fight the global HIV/AIDS crisis. I hope that this hearing will be the first step in marshaling the will of our colleagues here in the Congress to make sure we are doing our part. I know you are committed to taking action as are several Members of this Committee, including Congresswomen Barbara Lee and Maxine Waters, and you have my commitment to helping make sure this issue gets the attention it deserves.

Most Americans don't know very much about this crisis, much less have the chance to see firsthand the devastation this deadly disease has caused in sub-Saharan Africa and other nations around the world. I recently had the privilege, along with Congressman Houghton, who is testifying today as well, to travel as part of a bipartisan delegation to sub-Saharan Africa to learn about the staggering impact of this epidemic on the social fabric and the economy of Africa. The most important thing I took away from this mission was that we must sound the alarm immediately -- we don't have any time to waste.

The future of Africa may very well be at risk, and the consequences of the failure to act may condemn future generations to a deadly cycle of poverty and chronic illness. The statistics about the number of people in Africa who have died and who are suffering with HIV/AIDS disease are overwhelming. The number of AIDS orphans is already tragic and that number is expected to grow at a frightening pace. Other distinguished witnesses, including Sandy Thurman, our Director of National AIDS Policy, who is doing a tremendous job on this issue, will describe the scope of the problem in greater detail than can I. But what I can tell you as a result of our delegation's trip is that I am convinced improvement in the health and well-being of Africans is of paramount importance to citizens of every nation. A healthy and prosperous Africa is necessary not only for her people to thrive, but will lead to a more stable world and generate tremendous new opportunities for increased international commerce.

Those of us who live in nations with high standards of living cannot become complacent about our success and good fortune and ignore the millions of our fellow human beings who are struggling to achieve political, economic and social progress of their own. Rather, I believe it is imperative that we do whatever we can to support them in their efforts to build lasting democracies and better futures for their countries.

It is impossible to imagine lasting political or social progress in Africa without forcefully addressing the increasing toll HIV/AIDS is exacting on her people. During our trip, that message was reiterated in meetings we had with key government, non-government, and private sector leaders in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

And we saw up-close the devastating personal toll HIV/AIDS is taking on millions of individuals across the continent. We helped to dedicate a new voluntary HIV counseling and testing center in Zimbabwe, and we visited the largest hospital in the world in Soweto where we learned about maternal-child transmission of the virus. Virtually everywhere we went we were struck by the severity of the HIV/AIDS problem, and we came away with the belief that we need to act aggressively -- now.

While it is incumbent upon each nation to muster the resources it can to fight this disease, clearly many developing countries will require enhanced international assistance. We must increase international funding for vaccine research, for efforts to stop the spread of the HIV virus and for the care of those already infected. And, we must address the crushing debt problem with which too many of the poorest nations of the world are saddled. This debt burden must be eased so that these countries can undertake critically needed investments in health care, education, and economic development.

So I commend the President and Vice President for their leadership in calling for increased U.S. global AIDS assistance which I whole-heartedly support, and for making Africa and AIDS in Africa a priority at the United Nations. And I commend Chairman Leach, Congresswoman Lee and others who have introduced legislation to help fight HIV/AIDS in Africa and around the world. These efforts and today's hearing demonstrate there is growing understanding and interest in supporting new initiatives here in the Congress as well.

Two decades ago, we in the U.S. began to face the critical challenge millions of Africans and others are facing today. We need to take what we have learned with regard to prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and muster the will and the resources to help make sure that people in Africa, India, the Caribbean nations, China, Vietnam, Eastern Europe and elsewhere do not suffer and die needlessly.

As I stated at the outset, this is the moral issue of our time. We must act now. I hope this hearing will help energize our efforts in fighting the spread of HIV and ensure that we take the necessary steps to halt this immense threat to the future well-being of Africa. You have my commitment to do whatever I can and I urge us all to get to work.